The local planning-economic development nexus in transitioning resource-industry towns: Reflections (mainly) from British Columbia

Roger Hayter*, Stephan Nieweler

Department of Geography, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, V5A 1S6 Canada

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ABSTRACT

Local economic restructuring in a once dominant economic base, resource remapping imperatives that are privileging long neglected environmental values and aboriginal rights, and local empowerment are three intersecting themes that contextualize the idea of transitioning resource towns. Drawing especially from BC experience, this paper seeks to better understand transitioning resource towns from the perspective of the local planning-economic development nexus. While literature on resource town rejuvenation has emphasized local initiative and empowerment the role of local planning has been largely neglected. Yet local (‘municipal’) planning is a quintessentially local activity that profoundly shapes the routines of daily life through legally mandated ‘official’ plans that are required to draw upon community participation to meet collective community goals. However, the relationships between local planning and local development are problematical as they co-evolve in path dependent ways, sometimes in harmony with each other and sometimes not. Indeed, the onset of transitioning among resource towns implies important changes in the planning-development nexus. Initially, as resource towns boomed local planning played a subservient role in support of ‘given’ export-drive development. With the onset of transitioning, local planning is challenged to become part of more proactive local efforts to promote development. In practice, transitioning can be a durable status as restructuring and remapping imperatives reframe local governance and impose significant, inter-locking uncertainties on the planning-development planning nexus, often in association with increased regional networking. Even though transitioning suggests a search for new identities, the geographic realities of resource towns often implies mega-project proposals are enticing. Yet, these proposals are speculative, often opposed by remapping agents, and not easy to plan. Thinking about future development is also constrained by the inheritance of past plans that for many transitioning towns feature obsolescing downtown cores that comprise deteriorating commercial activities, housing stocks, infrastructure, and environmental clean-up issues. While these problems are varied, deep-seated and difficult to address, their rejuvenation illustrates the proactivity of local planning in leading development that can potentially benefit communities in relation to job creation, housing needs, commercial vitality, image and identity. Cooperative approaches among regionally connected transitioning towns and adjacent communities is suggested as a possible way of approaching the conundrums posed by obsolescing cores in transitioning towns.

1. Introduction

The transformation of global economy and society over recent decades, often summarily labelled as a shift from Fordism to post-Fordism, the ICT or simply as globalization, has stimulated escalating interest in its distinctive implications for rural peripheries (Halseth, 2017; Wood, 2004). For many mature resource-industry based towns this transformation has been sparked by significant job losses in the activities that provided the rationale for their existence, in turn encouraging a search to transition to new forms of employment. In many remote areas this transition is daunting, iterative and often further challenged by ‘paradigmatic’ changes in socio-political valuations of resources, and consequently in the relationships between resources and local development (Hayter and Patchell, 2015). Thus the contemporary “remapping” of forest peripheries in Canada and elsewhere (Affolderbach, 2011; Hayter and Barnes, 2012) and Australia’s “emerging geographies” (Moorcroft and Adams, 2014) are driven by deepened appreciation for environmental imperatives and aboriginal rights and traditions, both hitherto largely ignored by the priority of industrial commodification. Further, the “re-imagining” (Gill and Reed, 1997) of
transitional resource communities is increasingly driven by locally motivated (endogenous) “place-based development” that is modifying if not replacing reliance on (exogenous) “space-based development” (Markey et al., 2012). The intersection of local economic restructuring in a once dominant economic base, resource re-evaluations, and local empowerment underlies the idea of transitioning resource-industry towns and sets the context for contemplating their development and planning challenges to more sustainable futures.

Geographic remoteness and lock-ins to resource dependency - the staple trap in Canadian terms (Watkins, 1963) - pose formidable problems to resource-town transitioning, that for many observers are reinforced by neoliberal-inspired cost-cutting policies (Halseth, 2017). In response, if the development of resource towns were once orchestrated ‘top down’ by senior levels of government and large corporations, local actors are now seen as vital for creating desired community futures. In this regard, local empowerment has been recently analyzed from several overlapping perspectives, variously emphasizing: institutional capacity and asset building (Fischer and McKee, 2017), expert advice (Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins, 2004), knowledge creation (Pelkonen and Niinemets, 2015), regional participation (Zirul et al., 2015), governance (Argent, 2011; Dumarcher and Fournis, 2017), the role of women (Gill, 1996; Reed, 2003; McLeod and Hovorka, 2008), forms of community leadership and entrepreneurship (McVeen and Brashaw, 2009; Reed and Gill, 1997; Stern and Hall, 2010), and community resilience (Deacon and Lamanes, 2015). Moreover, notwithstanding histories of booming and busting, and associated in- and out-migration, transitioning resource towns comprise established populations who wish to remain in place (Asscher et al., 2016).

Yet, as Douglas (2005, p231) insightfully observes: “local government can be an almost invisible backdrop in the rural development discourse”, even though it is “a sine qua non for rural development.” This neglect of local government particularly extends to its key function of local or municipal planning. Yet community or municipal planning is a quintessential local activity that is legally required, quasi-autonomous and intimately connected with local development, forming a local planning-economic development nexus. As two sides of the same coin, local planning and development are often conventionally distinguished in terms of a public-private interest dichotomy. In practice, local planning and economic development agendas dynamically interact. Development proposals, whether originating in the public or private sectors, typically claim a public purpose and are required to engage local planning, and planning is often elaborated in terms of social, political, environmental and economic development (Thomas, 2016; Hodge et al., 2017).

This paper’s overall objective is to better understand transitioning resource towns from the perspective of the local planning-economic development nexus. We particularly seek to connect hitherto ignored local planning perspectives to studies of local economic development with its associated themes of diversification, restructuring, rejuvenation, and more recently resilience. Such connections can add insights into transitioning resource towns for several, related reasons. First, local planning and development are symbiotically and problematically related, co-evolving in path-dependent ways that are both contradictory and conflicted, sometimes in harmony with each other, sometimes not. As the Canadian case illustrates, legally required official community (municipal) plans (OCPs), based on obligations to properly consult with local residents to shape land use and activity patterns, formally underpin these relationships (Cullingworth, 2015; Hodge and Gordon, 2014). OCPs are major policy statements, rooted in previous investments in the built landscape and associated value systems and periodically revised to harmonize the emerging multiple goals and needs of local residents. Second, in broad terms the evolution of the planning-development nexus provides a key marker in the emergence of resource town transitioning. During Fordism resource-based economic development was exogenously driven with local planning subservient to the needs of the ‘given’ economic base. In Cullingworth’s (2015) terms, traditionally local planning involved local administration and service provision, not policy and economic development. In contrast, the onset of transitioning means that development is no longer hierarchically orchestrated and structured. Rather, development is highly uncertain, in Sjoholt’s (1987) metaphor “unruly” in process and outcome, increasingly dependent upon locally pro-active behaviour including by local governments. Whether or not local planners themselves shape transitioning debates, they are tasked with anticipating and/or responding to proposed developments that may or may not happen, and may or may not conform to existing OCPs. Indeed, in transitioning towns, speculation over mega-projects has become especially controversial, caught up in debates over cultural and environmental imperatives of remapping, while raising important dilemmas for local planning.

Third, the evolutionary trajectories of resource industries, their maturation and decline, has typically co-evolved with aging urban infrastructures, most evidently expressed in dilapidated downtown cores, encompassing both commercial activities and housing. While possibilities for downtown renewal in rejuvenating transitioning resource towns are recognized (Barnes and Hayter, 1992; Lambe, 2008), the co-evolution of obsolescing industrial and urban structures has not received systematic attention. In practice, the planned dispersal of commercial and residential activities to outlying areas has contributed to the problems of downtown cores. Yet the latter remain important in policy statements (OCPs) and, if obsolescing cores are janus-face inheritances that are hard to address, their rejuvenation can help stimulate local development.

Fourth, attention to the local planning-development nexus of transitioning resource towns reveals both the potentials and limits of local empowerment. Thus municipal planning is a key local institution, rooted in local understanding and participation while shaping the routines of daily life. However, as Cullingworth (2015) explicates in the Canadian case, local planning is at the bottom of a superstructure of plans organized and mandated by more powerful senior levels of government that are territorial, sectoral and site-specific. Moreover, the global shift occurring at all societal levels towards more open-ended, pluralistic, laterally networked governance models of decision making, away from structured hierarchical models (Bevir, 2012), has engulfed transitioning resource towns, including by the engagement of environmental non-government organizations and aboriginal peoples with their distinctive views on resource values. Evolving governance is also associated with the blurring of local boundaries as transitioning towns become more involved in regional networking, moving away from their traditional characterization as hierarchically controlled enclaves (Zirul et al., 2015). Indeed, transitioning towns have become more global as well as local (and regional) as they search for new markets (Bowles and Wilson, 2015) and are influenced by the ‘power geometries’ of remapping agents (Hayter, 2003).

In approach, the paper is heuristic and reflective in nature, seeking to encourage greater consideration of the planning-development nexus in studies of resource town evolution. The discussion is especially shaped by the trajectories of resource cycles and towns in British Columbia (BC) since the early 1980s (Edenhofer and Hayter, 2013; Markey et al., 2012). In general, the Fordist resource booms that diffused growth throughout BC after World War 2 were arrested by the recessionary crisis of the early 1980s and the connected proliferation of resource conflicts led by powerful forces of remapping. For many resource towns this crisis has marked a ‘turning point’ in their resource-dependent evolution, featuring both industrial and urban obsolescence. If processes and outcomes are varied, this paper emphasizes resource town transitioning as an important durable phenomena, marked by key changes in the planning-development nexus. Hopefully this analysis resonates among resource town Canada and to other peripheries, such as in Australia and New Zealand, helping to facilitate comparative work (Argent and Measham, 2014; Connelly and Nel, 2017; Halseth, 2017). The remaining discussion proceeds by providing a life cycle overview of
the planning-development nexus during Fordism as (‘pre-transitioning’) prelude for exploring the distinctive, problematic nature of transitioning processes that is often reinforced by mega-project speculation, and complicated by the conundrum of obsolescing cores and aging infrastructures. Fig. 1 locates the towns in BC that are mentioned in this paper.

2. The Fordist prelude to resource town transitioning

As Freeman and Louça (2001, p3) advise “change is permanent and irreversible, time repeats, never repeating”, and understanding socio-economic evolution or transitioning – synonymous terms for them - is deeply challenging. This challenge is often met by conceptualizing transitioning from life cycle perspectives that associate changes in key attributes of some entity (e.g. resource towns) with the stages of birth, growth, and maturity. This approach importantly emphasizes secular (rather than cyclical or equilibrium-seeking) change. Lucas’ (1971) pioneering sociological study, for example, explains life in Canadian resource towns from their opening to maturity in terms of (permanent) changes in interpersonal relations and (non-economic) institutional and demographic characteristics while subsequent studies have explored stages of winding down, restructuring or post-maturity on the basis of economic indicators such as employment and migration (e.g. Bradbury and St Martin, 1983; Halseth, 1999). Admittedly, however measured, the linkages between resource town transition and life cycle stages are not straightforward or mechanical. Rather, the processes underlying the contemporary transitioning of resource towns are multi-causal, contingent, path dependent, and their futures uncertain.

In this study, an idealized life cycle perspective provides a point of departure for exploring the evolutionary dynamics of resource towns that had boomed and matured during Fordism, especially in the three decades after World War 2, before experiencing crisis and restructuring, a widespread occurrence in BC (Fig. 2). Thus a conventional S-shaped life-cycle template of resource town trajectories is framed by ‘some’ growth indicator(s), such as employment, in relation to evolutionary time, summarized as from Fordism to post-Fordism, and annotated to highlight the local planning-development nexus before and after the onset of transition. In outline, during Fordism resource industry towns

Fig. 1. Reference map of British Columbia’s towns cited in text.
were typically thought of as enclaves with defined boundaries within which local planning operated as part of a hierarchical structure of government as a subservient, service provider in support of ‘autonomous’ export-driven resource development. In contrast, in transitioning towns, the planning-development nexus is more pro-active and interdependent while facing more uncertain futures and becoming part of more diverse systems of governance that involve stronger regional ties. If gradual changes in these directions were occurring, shifts in community fortunes and the planning-development nexus are especially marked by so-called ‘turning point crises’. Subsequent evolutionary tracts are highly varied, ranging from widening down to virtual ghost town status, as at Ocean Falls on BC’s remote northwest coast, to becoming vibrant, diversified centres as illustrated by the former forestry town of Squamish, now part of Vancouver metro’s expanding influence (Reed and Gill, 1997), and by Armidale’s transformation to a high tech, university town within South-east Australia (Sorenson, 2017). For many resource towns, however, transitioning is a lengthy status.

For Lucas (1971), the evolution of Canadian resource towns begins with their construction, followed by the three further stages of recruitment, (early) transition, and maturity (Fig. 2). From this perspective, resource towns originate with ‘the bang’ of construction and the arrival of temporary work-camp-based workforces. Subsequently, mill operations (and the town’s population) feature the recruitment of a permanent workforce, that provides a basis for an (early) transition stage (transition 1 on Fig. 2) that Lucas (1971, p70) defined in terms of a shift from community control by higher levels of government and/or key corporate participants towards locally elected, ‘citizen-driven’ local government. In practice, these stages occurred organically around the efforts of pioneering individuals, or (later) as Instant Towns planned from the top-down by senior governments and corporations as ideal communities designed to provide home spaces equivalent to metropolitan suburbs (Robinson, 1962). While Lucas (1971, pp96-8) hinted at the “uncertain future” of resource towns his analysis ended with maturity that he associated with the establishment of stable, adult, family-centred workforces, and the recognition that not all young people would find jobs in established resource activities. For many Canadian resource towns, however, maturity has been arrested by crisis and transitioning, with important implications for the planning-development nexus.

Although focused on local social institutions, Lucas ignored planning, a neglect similarly evident in then prevailing (economic) theorizations of export-driven resource exploitation in Canada that emphasized exogenous supplies of capital, organization, infrastructure and workers in the opening up remote, ‘empty’ lands (Gunton, 2003; Hayter and Barnes, 1990). Yet local planning became widespread during Fordism (Transition 1) and in BC, for example, all municipalities were required to create OCPs by 1967. Then, planning was ‘physically’ oriented on zoning land use patterns and auto-based accessibility as it sought to improve community livability, provide local administration and cater to local demands for residential, service, and recreational activities (Cullingworth, 2015; Hodge and Gordon, 2014). With the primacy of resource dependency taken as given, economic development strategy was not a concern for local planning. Nevertheless, planning decisions made during Fordism have had long-lasting implications for contemporary development. Thus in BC’s older (pre-car) resource towns, typically built around grid patterns, commercialized street cores, denser housing and often close to industrial sites, planning responses in the 1960s to the demands of growing populations emphasized the dispersal of housing and services that, however unintentionally, have contributed to contemporary problems of core obsolescence in transitioning towns. Similarly, the planning of BC’s instant towns, that imposed structured ‘top-down’ designs that sharply demarcated industrial sites from centralized, covered shopping malls and metropolitan-style suburbs dedicated to detached, single family housing on car friendly, winding street patterns, has bequeathed problems. Thus with the onset of transitioning and competition from elsewhere, the malls have deteriorated (and were not part of the last instant town plans at Whistler and Tumbler Ridge), housing supply in type and location is limited and, as vividly illustrated in Mackenzie’s case (Krep et al., 1979), the suburban lay-outs restricted social interactions especially for married women and were poorly designed for northern climates.

Across BC, as resource-led job growth and high wage levels, including through temporary downtowns, generally prevailed during Fordism, local planning (and government) played subordinate service-providing roles in resource towns. However, the permanent closure or significant downsizing of traditionally dominant resource activities mark turning points in community fortunes that have challenged this
subservience (transition 2, Fig. 2). While such problems have occurred at varying times for various reasons, the 1980s’ recession proved to be a widespread turning point among BCs resource towns, with downsizing often periodically reinforced in subsequent crises (Hayter and Edenhofer, 2016). More broadly, this evolution may be seen as an expression of a post-Fordist ‘paradigmatic’ transformation of many western economies (Freeman and Louça, 2001). Whatever the causes, the permanent decline (local deindustrialization) in a resource town’s economic base required a rethinking of the community planning-developmen
texus.

The challenges facing this rethinking are formidable, especially when contrasted with urban situations. Thus large cities routinely assume the continuation of population growth, organic forms of economic diversification as directed by Marshallian and/or Jacob’s hypotheses, the realization of clustering advantages, the attraction of ‘high tech’ activities, and the support of a diversity of institutions captured by the idea of institutional thickness (Amin and Thrift, 1994). In contrast, transitioning resource towns are threatened by ongoing population decline and out-migration, and the need to ‘somehow’ brainstorm initiatives and generate institutional capacity, often simply to maintain the status quo or slow the rate of decline. The options available to cities are rarely practical in remote ‘institutionally thin’ resource towns (Isaksen, 2017). Further, by the end of the Fordist boom, transitioning resource towns in many peripheries were on the front-lines of rapidly emerging conflicts over resource values and governance, driven by re-mapping imperatives that are empowering previously marginalized aboriginal and environmental voices (Clapp et al., 2016). In BC, the co-evolution of resource sector restructuring and remapping is vividly revealed as transitioning towns have increasingly sought to pro-actively cope with uncertain development prospects and more diverse governance, often in association with growing regional ties among similar communities (Fig. 2).

3. The problematic transitioning of resource town BC

In BC, the early 1980s’ recession as a turning point crisis from (Fordist) growth and (relative) stability to (post-Fordist) downsizing and volatility is well illustrated by the dominant forest industries (Hayter and Edenhofer, 2016). Especially among big commodity operations in wood processing and pulp and paper, 1979/80 marked peak levels of forest industry employment with the early 1980s’ job losses a signal for periodic downsizings that have continued to present times. Meanwhile, compensating growth in smaller-scale forest product operations has been concentrated in urban areas. For resource towns, previous concerns over recruitment, voluntary turnover and labour supply were now stood on their head by problems of labour demand, out-migration and population downsizing (Halseth, 1999). Further, especially in coastal BC, the 1980s’ recession stimulated an intensification of resource conflicts that were initially led by ENGOs who argued that the commodification of BCs forests was not only environmentally destructive but demonstrably incapable of sustaining jobs. In tandem, aboriginal protests quickly expanded throughout the province, motivated by desires to gain aboriginal rights over resources that they feared were becoming exhausted (Tennant, 1990). These desires were linked to demands for treaties that, unlike the rest of Canada, with few exceptions had not been signed in BC. In BCs forest sector, these conflicts have been powerfully reinforced by a lumber trade dispute with the US, that not coincidentally originated in the 1980s’ recession (Hayter, 2003).

The onset of the 1980s’ recession were not immediately conducive to local participation in the long term rethinking of community futures. In BC the long-run implications of this crisis, both with respect to permanent job losses and the enduring, escalating nature of remapping were not anticipated or always initially appreciated by industry, community leaders or workers. In the context of serious social distress, in forest communities such as Port Alberni and Powell River, individuals and families were left to cope by themselves while workers sought jobs elsewhere, still others retired, and for many unemployment and welfare benefits became important sources of (reduced) income (Barnes et al., 2001; Behrisch et al., 2002/3). In tandem, permanent employment downsizing in the dominant economic base and its socially disruptive effects undermined long-standing assumptions within the planning-development nexus. With little or no prior experience, local governments and planners were now challenged with stimulating local economic development while facing the spectre of a declining population and tax base, and the cumulative negative multiplier effects of business closures and local government cutbacks. Such trends compromised institutional capacity to respond to crisis or long-term-thinking just when it was needed most.

Moreover, as transitioning communities grappled with the reality of economic restructuring, there was growing appreciation that the proliferation of resource conflicts in BC in the 1980s were not ephemeral but were helping to stimulate new social attitudes and rules of the game shaping resource development in favour of the remappers (Edenhofer and Hayter, 2013). This appreciation was confirmed by a battery of initiatives introduced by a newly elected (1991) provincial government that included support for environmental conservation and regulation and for aboriginal rights within a re-invigorated treaty process (Gunton, 1997). In practice, as political negotiations over the latter proved problematical, aboriginal peoples have successfully pursued their interests through legal channels. Indeed, several Supreme Court of Canada decisions have recognized aboriginal peoples, not just as stakeholders, but as quasi-sovereign government partners with unextinguished aboriginal title and rights to control resource projects on aboriginal territory (Barry, 2012). The implications of these decisions are especially evident in BC where over-lapping land title claims from around 200 aboriginal peoples cross the entire province, and where reference to ‘aboriginal) government to (federal/provincial) government’ (G2G) in the Great Bear Rainforest Agreement 2016 reflects a more powerful role in governance for aboriginal peoples at the expense of established decision-making hierarchies (Clapp et al., 2016). Whether or not aboriginal litigation strategies involve “over-reach” to use Newman’s (2015, p1) term, the implications and perhaps “the lack of clarity over key [court] decisions”, regardless of which party is deemed ‘the winner’, can create uncertainty for political responses and local development. Environmental policies and politics have added to these dilemmas. Thus lengthy, costly and increasingly stringent environmental impact assessments (EIAs) are required by both federal and provincial governments as pre-requisites for resource investment approvals. Even so, ENGOs in BC remain strenuously opposed to large-scale resource exploitation and are often critical of environmental regulations and their enforcement, while strongly supporting aboriginal rights. Yet, ENGOs and aboriginal peoples have different agendas and views on resource development. Meanwhile in BC, federal and provincial government approaches to aboriginal and environmental legislation, and to resource development, also differ and are often hard to reconcile.

Although scarcely influential in their formulation, the planning-development nexus of transitional resource towns has been profoundly affected by remapping policies and pleas, and their uncertain evolution. Thus, remapping has redefined relationships between resources and development (Hayter and Patchell, 2015), increased the transaction costs of resource-based developments for business (Flanagan, 2015), and stimulated new governance structures over land use policies (Clapp et al., 2016). In BC, for example, the Clayquot Sound UNESCO World Heritage Site of 2000 and the Great Bear Rainforest Agreement of 2016 have privileged conservation values over large areas, and established aboriginal rights, while reducing or eliminating resource supplies to nearby towns. Indeed, the trend towards increased conservation area designation is well-established (Gunton, 1997) while the resolution of land claims is gathering momentum and aboriginal empowerment an increasing influence on the practices of the local planning-development
nexus within transitioning towns. In Campbell River, for example, the downtown vicinity is divided (seamlessly to traffic) between aboriginal and non-aboriginal ownership with the former attracting important (retail, recreational and educational) services that are integral to the community but under different planning (and taxation) controls that create competition for investment. In Kitimat, a coveted central site occupied by a hospital has been transferred to aboriginal ownership, and the hospital relocated. More generally, bearing in mind that the aboriginal share of population is often large within, as well as adjacent to, municipalities, reaching over 38% in Prince Rupert, for Markey et al. (2012) and Bowles and Wilson (2015) resolution of the treaty process in BC is a necessary condition for local development. Such resolution is also intimately tied to addressing overlapping but distinct environmental imperatives.

The challenge of transitioning resource communities is underlined by Halseth et al. (2017, 281–9) in the case of Mackenzie, BC, an instant town developed in the late 1960s. Just 20 years later the community's viability was threatened by ongoing rationalizations of its pulp and paper operations. In response, the community sought advice from outside consultants whose reports in 1991, 1997 and 2007 basically reinforced old attitudes and failed to arrest decline. Then in 2008, after a survival plan prepared by a unit in the nearby University of Northern British Columbia, with strong leadership from local government, the community chose a participatory approach to the identification of diversification opportunities in a new organization, Mackenzie in Motion. This approach emphasized extensive consultations within the community, including local surveys, detailed strategic visioning exercises and plans, the establishment of a local development officer, and through pro-active partnering with relevant provincial government agencies and regional stakeholders, including local aboriginal peoples and nearby municipalities and districts. If through this participatory form of planning and development, Mackenzie has gained some sense of direction around initiatives such as the creation of a community forest and recreational and life-style businesses, its future remains uncertain.

Indeed, transitioning can define a lengthy status, in Mackenzie's case beginning no later than 1990 and apparently still ongoing, and even longer for towns such as Port Alberni where economic dislocation began in 1981. The challenge facing transitioning towns to escape resource dependence, is underlined by speculation over new resource booms.

3.1. Mega-project speculation

Transitioning towns may wish to diversify from resource dependency but alternative prospects are hard to discern. Meanwhile, mega-projects reflecting local resource-based advantages can offer enticing prospects in the form of potentially massive short-term injections of employment, population and income, and hopefully sufficient permanent jobs and multiplier effects that at least retain the community's existing size, tax base, and levels of servicing. Across BC in recent years, for example, huge investments in pipelines, oil refineries and especially in liquefied natural gas (LNG) export terminals have been proposed, involving problematic implications for the planning-development nexus of numerous towns especially on the coast. Several summary insights may be noted in this context.

First, mega-project speculation in BC’s transitioning towns is not simply an expression of locally locked-in attitudes to an old staple-trap mentality. Rather, such institutional lock-ins have been undermined by several interacting themes: the big business and labour union interests at the local heart of these attitudes are now much weaker (Hayter and Edenhofer, 2016); transitioning towns are well aware of their booming and bustling histories and more interested in diversification, resilience and sustainability (Ascher et al., 2016); remapping voices are ever-present, locally as well as regionally (Clapp et al., 2016); and community populations no longer collectively support further resource exploitation as testified by Kitimat’s decision to hold a plebiscite on a proposed pipeline, not to mention the resulting negative vote (Bowles and MacPhail, 2017). Further, in 2017, a new provincial coalition government, between the New Democratic Party and the Green Party, was elected and has expressed strong opposition to large-scale resource exploitation and related infrastructure developments. Nevertheless, if staple trap mentalities have weakened, the geographic realities of remote transitioning towns, with limited potentials for diversification, imply that proposals for mega-projects continue to entice.

Second, as brief reference to proposed LNG investments in BC indicate, the loudest of expectations may not be realized. Thus, based on significant resource advantages and growing market demands in Asia, prior to the 2013 provincial election, the premier-elect’s throne speech announced proposals for three large-scale and two medium-scale LNG plants that were expected to generate a $100 billion resource fund by the 2020s. This announcement raised the development hopes of many towns in BC, especially in the coastal region where nearly 20 proposals were indicated. Four proposals centred on the Prince Rupert area, three in Kitimat, and several on Vancouver Island and the South Coast, including Bamfield (near Port Alberni), Woodfibre, Bamberton (an offshore facility), Delta and Campbell River, the latter re-purposing a former pulp and paper site. Pipelines from northeastern BC and Alberta are also part of these proposals. With the possible exception of the small-scale venture at Woodfibre, these hopes remain (March 2018) just that. Indeed, the leading proposal led by Petronas, a Malayisan-based consortium that had received environmental approval for a LNG facility in Prince Rupert and a new pipeline and had negotiated an agreement with one aboriginal group, withdrew its planned ($14b) investment entirely in 2017. One tentative proposal (Exxon) now remains in Prince Rupert while in Kitimat, Shell and Chevron have placed their LNG proposals on indefinite hold until the next window of opportunity that they anticipate in several years time, hopefully as a result of rising Asian demand. Elsewhere, including the US and Australia, the LNG industry has already expanded rapidly (Bridge and Bradshaw, 2017).

Third, the remapping agenda with its emphasis on environmental and aboriginal priorities has contributed to locally diverse governance and the speculative nature of mega-projects. For business, the uncertainties associated with building expensive, capital intensive facilities in remote locations to serve distant markets are compounded by the costs, time and uncertainties of negotiating with aboriginal and environmental interests to obtain a social license to go-ahead. As stakeholders, business, ENGOs and aboriginal peoples have fundamentally different interpretations of resource values and views over desired futures, with compromises difficult to find (Affolderbach, 2011; Clapp et al., 2016). Variations among and within both environmental and aboriginal groups further increases transaction costs. For example, while Petronas publicly noted that changed market conditions underlay its withdrawal from its LNG project in Prince Rupert, social license negotiations had been protracted, ENGOs continued to contest its environmental approval, and three of four aboriginal groups with local land claims had rejected an agreement in principle (Palmer, 2017). The social license is both a precondition for resource approvals and a weapon to prevent them, and to an important degree beyond the influence of local governments and planning.

Fourth, for targeted towns, mega-projection speculation reveals a catch 22 situation in which preparatory work is a necessary but insufficient condition for investment go-aheads. Communities need to commit resources to analyze project proposals and their potential impacts, respond to regulatory processes, such as providing data for EIAs requested by senior governments, and contribute to planning new infrastructure, the clearing and preparation of sites, and construction of related roads, housing and services, whether or not projects proceed. In Kitimat, for example, following closures of pulp and paper and chemical operations and the job-downsizing automation of its aluminum smelter, local planning supported LNG proposals by facilitating land clearance for two major projects on the waterfront, and a (prominent) site at the entrance to the town to house up to 3000 temporary workers. These
sites are presently unused. Meanwhile, at Port Edward (pop. 600), the costs of planning preparations following the cancellation of the Petronas project have been written-off. Further, given the time required to adequately prepare for mega-projects, the catch 22 situation can be worsened by reductions or turnover in planning departments caused by budgetary shortfalls in (downsizing) transitional towns. Moreover, new resource booms, potentially such as LNG in BC, can have different implications from previous booms for local communities (Murphy et al., 2016), while options for fly-in fly-out workforces, that are chosen by senior levels of government and participating corporations, create additional layers of cost-benefit implications that are hard to assess by existing towns (Vodden and Hall, 2016; Storey and Hall, 2017).

4. The conundrum of obsolescing cores

For the planning-development nexus, the problems created by the secular decline in once dominant resource activities within BC's transitioning towns are connected to the secular aging of urban infrastructure, especially evident in obsolescing downtown cores. In seeking to serve the needs of industry, many resource towns were functional in conception. Commercial buildings and housing were typically cheaply constructed, located close to large, heavy industrial operations and, with some exceptions regarding prominent public buildings, not (much) inspired by aesthetic ideas, prestige, or some future sense of heritage value. Moreover, the problems facing downtown cores have been widely reinforced by the dispersal of commercial, institutional and residential land uses and activities to the outskirts of towns, often leading to fragmented town structures. Port Alberni, for example, has three commercial centres in addition to its core functions to serve a (2016) population of 18,000. Even in BC's (early) planned instant towns, such as Kitimat, Gold River and Mackenzie, the core shopping malls have deteriorated, increasingly neglected by residents who prefer to travel to other centres with big box stores and other amenities. But do transitioning town cores offer planning and development opportunities of rejuvenation? If so, should the design of core rejuvenation reflect the town's resource past, that may or may not be re-invigorated by another resource boom, or support some proposed new identity that may or may not be known? What functions, residential as well as commercial, would a rejuvenated core provide? Can public funds be raised and leveraged to attract private investment?

Even if functional (and cheap) there are powerful forces of inertia in the built landscapes of transitioning resource towns. As long recognized in the urban morphology literature (Conzen, 1966), functions, buildings and transportation networks are progressively more difficult to modify, let alone transform. Admittedly this tradition reflects desires to maintain the historicity of culturally valuable townscapes in which castles and cathedrals are typically prized landscape dominants. In contrast, resource townscapes are often visually dominated by giant industrial operations, more associated with socially negative and deteriorating externalities. Yet, the morphologies of transitional resource towns are deeply embedded and stable. Large-scale resource industries are locally immobile, while established road networks and other key infrastructures (water, sewage, electricity) that typically occupy the same routes are hard to change. Although relatively small in scope, the cores of transitioning resource towns have been resistant to comprehensive rebuilding, modified only by piecemeal changes, mainly to functions within existing buildings and by opportunities created by fire damage.

In Port Alberni's case, for example, the OCP of 2014 incorporates the lay-out of the town’s core as established at the turn of the century around the two autonomous communities of Alberni and Port Alberni that formally amalgamated in 1967. This morphology was strongly shaped by local physical geography with a massive industrial site occupying flat tidal waterfront land and the two founding communities developing upslope on either side of Roger's Creek, each with their own cores (Fig. 3). If jobs have been decimated since the 1980 peak of around 5500 union workers, this site and its aging industrial buildings, continues to dominate the waterfront and viewscapes of the town, and logging trucks still use Third Avenue – the centre of downtown – for access. Meanwhile, caves aside to mill tours and steam engine rides that provide summer tourist activities, industrial domination of the waterfront has limited tidewater and beach access to individuals and, more generally, the opportunities to physically modify the community in order to create a new image and more diversified functions to serve residents and visitors, including tourists en route to the Pacific Rim National Park. Rather, since the late 1960s, facilitated by a new by-pass highway, local planning has supported the ('upslope') dispersal of residential, retail and public sector and other service activities, including shopping malls and big box outlets, on both the (former) Alberni and Port Alberni sides of the amalgamated community. In contrast, a few caves aside to piecemeal rejuvenation, Port Alberni's downtown area is characterized by retail and related activities that struggle to survive, some government functions and vacant spaces, along with an old, deteriorating housing stock geared to low income residents.

In general, the problem of obsolescing cores in BC's transitioning towns reflects failures to attract modernizing investments, public or private, and competition from the dispersal of commercial centres to serve nearby residential developments. For the planning-development nexus such trends are justified by resident preferences for improved living conditions, that includes distancing from big industrial facilities, and access to modern services. For their part, providers of shopping malls, fast food restaurants, and big box outlets, as well as various public goods, seek low land costs, large spaces and road access that are not available in downtowns. Moreover, since the onset of transitioning, investments in new, dispersing service functions have been seen as job-providers and important sources of local development. Nevertheless, dispersal trends have reinforced problems of cores, most evidently seen in the declining state of retailing. In Port Alberni's case, the new, even more dispersed big box centres are now threatening the shopping malls that originally took away business from the core. Ironically, in many transitioning towns planning support of dispersed development through zoning, servicing and infrastructure provision has simultaneously favoured the attraction of externally controlled branch and franchise operations, with their brand name associations, while undercutting the viability of locally-owned small businesses in disadvantaged cores. In many downtowns, the closure of key businesses, or periodic fires, results in gap-tooth patterns of built form as reinvestment fails to materialize where prominent businesses once stood.

For transitioning towns engagement in the comprehensive modernization of downtown cores is deeply problematic, beyond simply the relative advantages of dispersal. Thus, problems of core rejuvenation are widely created by small, discontinuous land ownership, absent landowners, low taxes on vacant land and parking lots, and speculative ownership, especially by external corporations hedging in future booms. Indeed, the widespread role of absentee owners of vacant land and rented buildings in downtown cores is reinforced in transitional resource towns in BC where property speculators have purchased ‘holds’ on properties in order to hedge bets on possible mega-project investments. Regular payments are made to property owners until a deal is closed or abandoned. In the meantime key sites are tied up for years, pre-empting other development opportunities and, whether it leads to new investment or not, speculation can drive up land values and rents which threatens small locally-based downtown businesses. The adjacency of industrial operations and environmental clean-up costs on vacant land are other problems facing core modernization. Mandatory clean-up costs as a pre-requisite for redevelopment can render potential sites non-economic and landlords may prefer to hold land in anticipation of possible senior government subsidies. Even after closure, problem of toxicity render large industrial spaces difficult to redevelop, especially if the responsibility for clean-up costs is unclear, and conversion to alternative uses difficult. In Campbell River and Squamish, former extremely large coastal sites of forest product complexes have remained vacant, respectively since 2009 and 2003.
Campbell River, the former pulp and paper ('Elk Falls') site has remained under industrial zoning, partly in the hope of attracting a major LNG facility. In Squamish, now within metro Vancouver's commuting zone, local plans remain for major residential and commercial developments, and a small LNG operation is planned for the adjacent, isolated Woodfibre pulp and paper mill site, closed in 2005.

Further, diverse ownership among relatively small parcels of land, along with other negative externalities, creates problems for public service provision and housing renewal in cores. In Port Alberni, for example, a new library and economic development office were located away from the downtown (and municipal hall), losing the chance of creating spin-offs in the core. Housing renewal poses a particularly big challenge. Thus higher density residential developments could potentially meet the needs of singles and older people whose space needs are modest and who would prefer central access. In older resource towns, such as Port Alberni, downtown housing is in poor condition and serves mostly low income people, while in instant towns, such as Kitimat, core housing was not provided, and cannot now readily accommodated. Unfortunately, the cost of assembling land and constructing apartments and condominiums in transitioning communities where overall housing demand is low or declining, is higher than the value of the existing suburban housing stock, thus limiting demand (but not need) for such housing.

In general, transitioning town cores have been left more or less morphologically intact, but with diminishing community roles. Nevertheless, efforts to retain core vitality indicate alternative choices are possible. In Prince Rupert, for example, after lengthy negotiations Walmart was forced to accept a core location for its investment rather than a greenfield site at the town’s edge. In response to the closure of its major sawmill and economic base in the early 1980s, Chemainus became famous as ‘the little town that did’, rejuvenating its centre by the painting of large-scale murals depicting its history, a building enhancement project, a new dinner-theatre and gatherings of artists (Barnes and Hayter, 1992). While these changes were primarily about appearance, walkability and symbols of renewal, local entrepreneurs formed a downtown business improvement association to facilitate marketing and investments. As another, albeit controversial ‘downtown’ experiment, planners in the old mining town of Kimberley imposed a Bavarian theme in downtown building design regulations, and public realm investments. Other renewal projects have typically been smaller in scale and vision, often in support of heritage buildings or tourism. Meanwhile, in Tumbler Ridge and Whistler, BC’s last instant towns, the downtowns were designed along more traditional, pedestrian oriented places, with smaller malls included at the edge of downtown (but not at the towns’ peripheries).

However dilapidated, the resilience and civic importance of downtown cores in transitioning towns remains evident in OCPs, giving pause to contemplate more effective responses to restore their vitality. Arguably, their pro-active planning could unlock development potentials, confirming the interactive nature of the planning-development nexus. After all, transitioning resource town cores continue to provide commercial and administrative functions, meeting places for people, and spaces for local entrepreneurs. Indeed, a focus on core modernization could be associated with a stronger commitment to promoting local, small businesses, at least counter-balancing the bias of planning and development activity towards facilitating branch and franchise investments. Old town centres are the heart of the traditional identity of transitional resource towns, part of long-established street patterns and building styles, and any heritage buildings are often concentrated there. Core renewal potentially can enhance local identity, residential pride and social interactions and provide visitors with distinctive experiences whether related to aesthetics, viewscores or services. Moreover, core obsolescence and fragmentation among transitioning towns, implies wasted resources, duplication and inefficiencies in land use and activity patterns. Indeed, rejuvenated cores could stimulate localized external economies whether with respect to public or private sector services in
administration, transportation, professional and consumer services. Improvements in adjacent housing stocks, including to target a diversity of incomes and residents, could further the vibrancy of downtown cores. In this regard, in light of aging demographics, the provision of smaller living spaces for seniors who desire close access to health services and other daily needs without depending on auto use (a requirement in the suburbs) is a potential focus for new housing development in many transitioning towns.

In many cases, government intervention is likely needed to unlock key development sites that are tied up by fractured ownership, contamination or access challenges while public-private partnerships are an option to facilitate complex projects with multiple uses and higher levels of risk. Such intervention could incorporate helping to fund new housing and infrastructure improvements. As an opportunity for local planning to lead development, rejuvenating the cores of transitioning resource towns admittedly faces deep-seated problems, beyond the financial reach of local budgets. Regional networking and cooperation may offer possibilities to help address these concerns.

4.1. Linking obsolescence to regional cooperation: a comment

Ostrom’s (2010) pioneering work emphasizes the significance of cooperative behaviour among stakeholders for facilitating local development and problem-solving including in many rural peripheries where institutional thinness is an inherent problem (Isaksen, 2017). While forms of cooperation vary in regional contexts around the world (ibid.; Patchell, 1996), in broad terms cooperation can facilitate trust and mutual understanding, pool available human resources to plan, lobby, solve problems and stimulate brain-storming, share views on common planning problems, and integrate complementary initiatives. For transitioning towns and adjacent communities, an interesting question is whether the advantages of cooperation can be ‘regionalized’ to address the problems of core obsolescence, housing and related infrastructural and environmental problems. There are reasons to be optimistic in this regard.

Thus across rural Canada’s transitioning resource towns new horizontal connections are complicating older vertically structured notions of global-local dynamics, undermining their sense of enclave status while rendering the nature of place-based definitions of community and what is local ambiguous (Douglas and Annis, 2010). In rural BC, regional interactions and a deepened sense of regional consciousness are expressions of these trends (Markey et al., 2012; Zirul et al., 2015). Functionally, these connections have evolved with improved transportation networks connecting towns, the growth of adjacent residential spill-overs beyond municipal boundaries, and by recently empowered aboriginal communities. In tandem, emerging forms of cooperation have become increasingly evident among BC’s transitioning resource towns. This trend is illustrated by new community forests (McIlveen and Bradshaw, 2009), the previously noted Mackenzie in Motion (Halseth et al., 2017), the Great Bear Rainforest Agreement (Clapp et al., 2016), and ‘fair share’ agreements regarding revenues for communities from wealth generating resource extraction outside of municipal boundaries (Markey et al., 2012, pp218-21). Other examples relate to shared tourism marketing, the formation of aboriginal associations in support of LNG proposals, an agreement between the town of Terrace, the local airport authority and aboriginal peoples to establish an industrial park led by Chinese investors, and by broad support among northwest BC communities for port infrastructure investments in Prince Rupert. Regional cooperation around the theme of rejuvenating cores and related infrastructures could add to these commitments.

The potential benefits of core (‘mainstreet’) rejuvenation among small towns are recognized across North America, and relate to promoting identity and heritage values, social vibrancy, accessibility to key services, attractiveness to visitors, local entrepreneurship, and housing renewal (Lambe, 2008). Cooperation among adjacent and regional communities could enhance these benefits in several ways. First, cooperation implies broadening participation in planning processes and in the creation of ideas over the design and purpose of rejuvenation. In effect, core rejuvenation(s) could provide a constructive focus to engage diverse groups within the functioning regions of transitioning towns. If originally excluded from Chemainus’ downtown renewal project, for example, the related involvement of aboriginal peoples, who had been distressed by a mural of deceased elders that had not received their consecration, added new perspective and became a form of re-conciliation (Barnes and Hayter, 1992). Second, cooperative proposals could encourage local planners and development agencies to identify or build upon distinctive features of their cores, whether related to museums, art, building design, viewscape, food or other local retail specialities, public services, and recreational facilities. In this context, the general point is that complementary specializations in different towns can contribute to mutually beneficial differentiation. Regional cooperation may also help towns from engaging in race to the bottom tactics in attracting big box and related investments that often threaten downtown cores and rival communities. Third, regional cooperation in support of core rejuvenation proposals could be used by transitioning towns to bargain more effectively for financing and other forms of help from senior levels of government. Conventional practice is for communities to submit requests for funding from government programs on an individual basis. However, cooperation among transitioning towns and adjacent communities could enhance institutional capacities to develop proposals and encourage them to identify complementary benefits or at least negate tendencies towards zero sum rivalry. Collective proposals could also carry more political weight in accessing support and possibly reduce criticisms of political bias by senior governments in favouring one individual proposal over another. The federal government’s recently (2016) announced Canada Infrastructure Plan 2016, that proposed expenditures of $81b over the next decade, including $2b for rural and northern communities, is one program a cooperative approach could access to help resolve shared issues of core obsolescence, aging housing stocks and environmental clean-up.

Admittedly, among BC’s transitioning resource towns, cooperative approaches are deeply problematic. They face the legacies of domination by large-scale industry that have not been conducive to entrepreneurial cultures, the problems of out-migration and population downsizing, and the implications of remapping disputes over resource rights, ownership and governance that embrace a diversity of values among local stakeholders, and proclivities for civil disobedience and litigation. Transitioning resource towns also often compete with one another, for example for project funding, and in attracting ever-larger retail catchment areas that incorporate other towns. But conflict, hyper-competition and diversity underlie the need for cooperation. In this regard, if regional cooperation implies that local planning mandates are modified and up-scaled from their municipal roots, the shared rejuvenation of dilapidated cores, along with related infrastructural needs, potentially offers job creating, community and region-building momentum. Moreover, given its integrative, holistic and consensus driven nature (or ‘DNA’), local (regional) planning is likely to become an even more valuable institution in the cooperative development of transitioning towns.

5. Conclusion

For transitioning resource-industry towns jointly challenged by the imperatives of restructuring and remapping pleas for greater local initiative in shaping community futures have become mantra. The evolving nature of the local planning-development nexus reinforces and problematizes these pleas. Local planning is a mandatory, quintessential local activity, required to engage community stakeholders, as it shapes daily routines and intimately connects with uncertain development opportunities and implementation. However, if the local planning-development nexus has become more pro-actively interdependent,
planning and development activities in transitioning towns are constrained by the inheritance of previous decisions, are often under-resourced, and face increased local diversity of often contested motives and values over resource exploitation and its governance. Moreover, local planning and development both overlap and vary, and both are subject to non-local power structures and diverse global connections associated with restructuring and remapping. Indeed, transitioning towns are part of increasingly diverse regional (horizontal) and global (vertical) connections and forms of governance. The challenge for the local planning-development nexus within transitioning towns to achieve compromise let alone consensus has become more difficult, with local empowerment not by itself a unifying force but dependent on how diverse community members can cooperate and compromise over future directions. The identity problem inherent to the idea of transitioning resource towns is also more than an abstract or symbolic concern for the planning-development nexus but underlies debates over mega-project speculation and how to rejuvenate downtown cores.

Future research might elaborate a deeper theoretical understanding of the co-evolution of planning and development processes in transitioning resource-industry towns and peripheries. These processes have diverse rationalities, are often deeply politicized and ideals associated with regional cooperation, local empowerment and more diverse (democratic) governance are themselves problematical, questioned by deeply contested value systems that may not necessarily lead to compromises over desirable futures and new competitive forms of local economy. Untangling these interdependent themes would help illuminate the distinctive nature of transitioning resource towns and adjacent peripheries and pragmatically help with their planning and development. Empirically, comparative research exploring the dynamics of the planning-development nexus in transitioning towns would be welcome.

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